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Writing through the Bodies: Feminine Racial Consciousness in *A Lesson in Dead Language* by Adrienne Kennedy

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Abstract

Adrienne Kennedy is one of the finest avant-garde, American playwrights and her plays have intense sensibilities of gender and racial discrimination. Deeply autobiographic, the plays are manifestations to her experiences as a Black woman living in America and dealing with the deep-rooted stereotypes of race and gender throughout her life. Her one of the lesser known play- 'A lesson in Dead Language' not only cuts across the racial divide but is a sharp attack on the patriarchy beyond all boundaries. An analysis of the play is attempted and feminist and humanist issues inherent in the play are explored with a context to the causes that compelled her to write the plays.

Keywords- Black, Feminism, Avant-Garde, Stereotypes

Kennedy is one of America's most complex playwright and her plays were recognized as political and psychoanalytical statements in the emerging Black Power Movement of the 1960's. Her plays reveal the repressed fears, anger and desires hidden beneath the pretense of racial harmony. As a student, Kennedy found the social structure of Ohio State University, racially hostile and encountering bitter racial discrimination became indifferent to her studies. She began writing primarily to give an outlet to her feelings and her early poems imitate Edith Sitwell. Kennedy married Joseph. C. Kennedy in 1953 and had two sons and while her husband was in korea with the army she tried her hand at writing drama. Having studied creative writing at Columbia University, New York (1954-56) she wrote stories and a novel, which were unfortunately rejected. Suffocating loneliness marked her marriage and life in New York during the 1950's. Her husband, Joe Kennedy who was a doctoral student at Columbia was often absent. The people she did meet there never knew she wrote because for them she was only a mother and wife. In an interview, she said -'I'd been through that decade from age 20-30, 1955 to 1965 trying to write with babies and then experiencing divorce----'[1].

Later she elaborated upon her need to write as a quest for her own identity in People Who Led to My Plays- 'I often felt caring for a baby all day and being a young housewife a tremendous letdown. Was this where my life had been leading? I seemed drab to myself..... many times, I felt so unfulfilled in my role as a young housewife that Emma's (Madame Bovary) taking arsenic made sense to me. Both these women (second being Anna Katheraina) were plagued by endless, mysterious feelings of unhappiness and confusion despite the fact that they found a certain joy in their children and marriages, they were in an inexplicable turmoil, as I was.'[2]

Her plays are autobiographical and influenced by her social and cultural experiences. In an interview, she said- 'Autobiographical work is the only thing that interests me, apparently because that is what I do best' [3].

Most of her avant-garde' plays dramatize an African- American woman's search for identity. Her characters struggle with internalized social and cultural forces. Multi- voiced-ness or polyphony is another distinct and inescapable characteristic of her plays. Kennedy incorporates dialogism in the formal structure of her earlier plays and psychic landscapes manifest the ongoing battle between Euro centric and Afro centric society. It needs an intense and sensitive insight to understand her plays and interpret her private fantasies. Writing according to her is-'to struggle with the material that is lodged in your unconsciousness and trying to bring it to the conscious level.'[4] Her characters rarely reach integration. Their splitting processes become confused; they project both persecutory and ideal qualities onto each object, which is dramatized as alternative selves and which ultimately leads them to self-destruction. Her plays not only represent pregnancy, they are themselves pregnant in form. She produces images on stage, which are neither representative nor derivative but are self-sustaining. Kennedy blends symbolic, historical figures, racial images and myths to create surreal and highly personalized one-act plays. In most of the plays she traced her African heritage and blended history with the fragmented selves of her major characters. She explored her roots in her African heritage and gave a distinctive flavor to her art. The unique blend of art and history is the most distinguishing feature of her plays and her deep sensitive insight into the psyche of her characters makes Adrienne Kennedy's plays poetic statements in the theatre of racial and gender sensibilities.

A Lesson in Dead Language (1968), is beautiful play revealing deep feminine sensibility and brings out the trauma of sexual maturity in young girls. Kennedy uses non-realistic symbols in the play. Through a complex arrangement of Aristotelian elements of drama, she creates a powerful abstraction of human existence giving her characters a new kind of psychic freedom. Throughout the play Kennedy experiments with the spirit as primary locus for the dramatic action. The play is set is a brightly lighted classroom where a group of seven young adolescent girls are being taught 'Lesson I Bleed' by a large White dog, who is their teacher and who the girls also address as mother. They repeat the words' I bleed'

together as they write the lesson after their teacher who is both dead and alive. The lesson in progress is a Latin one about the assassination of Julius Ceaser. Ceaser's wife Calurnia had a dream about the loss of kingdom and the murder of Ceaser but she was guilty of not warning her husband of the impending danger. Since all the pupils in the class are females they share with Calpurnia the burden and shame of her guilty. The White dog asks all the pupils 'will the one who killed the White dog please come forward?'[5] And when none of them shoulders the responsibility the White dog says that everybody will share the punishment of that original sin by Calpurina- 'we will all bleed, since we do not know the one, we will all be punished.'[6] In the play, all the Mulatto girls wear White organdie dresses and when they stand at the blackboard large circles of blood are visible on the backs of their dresses for they actually bleed. These large circles of blood symbolize their loss of innocence and their initiation into the world of womanhood. While all the girls continue to bleed as punishment, the White dog makes them hundred times- 'I killed the white dog and that's why I must bleed for Ceaser.'[7]The girls unaware of the biological facts of bleeding are scared that they would 'bleed away and die.'[8] The group of adolescent girls face the trauma of growing up. Blood is seen as the painful way to womanhood and all of them say together- 'My mother says it's because I am a woman I bleed. Blood comes out of me.'[9] Kennedy herself suffered from acute blood phobia hence blood imagery keeps recurring in most of her plays. Blood to Kennedy is associated with death and the original sin leading to a 'curse' to entire womanhood. In her Memoirs Kennedy wrote- 'when I have the baby I wonder will I turn into a river of blood and die? My mother almost died when I was born.' [10]As the pupils bleed Kennedy's fears are reflected in what a frightened girl says- 'I bleed teacher, I bleed. I am bleeding mother'[11]. So, this lesson I bleed can also be interpreted as Lesson I (one); Bleed bleeding or the menstrual cycle is essential for social reasons also.

The white dog symbolizes both White and male and he assumes the authority of deciding to punish the entire class of young girls for a crime they had never committed. As a Black woman Kennedy always felt this injustice and hence said-'I just feel intensely- and it's really powerful- its two-fold; White society defines Black in terms of clichés. I always felt that I'm being defined in terms of a cliché' by White society. There is no doubt that I see life as tragic. I can talk about sunny days, but I definitely see life as trying to constantly wrestle.... I do feel oppressed by White American Society. I am very easily overwhelmed by numbers or the fact that there are, say, more American Whites than there are African Americans. A lot of my energy comes out of that feeling of oppression and from trying to break through being over defined by another group of people.'[12] The process of growing up and reaching sexual maturity must have been traumatic for Black girls in a White society because of their vulnerability in patriarchal American culture where they were forced to live under constant fear of sexual assault. Thus, the twin fears of racial and gender exploitation made growing up seem a punishment to them.

Realizing that the menstrual cycle was a painful process for women, Adrienne Kennedy said in an interview- 'I just have this thing about blood. I had always wanted to write about menstruation. To me menstrual periods no matter how long you have been having them are traumatic- simply the fact that you must bleed once a month'.[13] At the end of the play the tumbling down of the pinnacle signifies the end of patriarchy in Calpurnia's dreams. The pupils in 'A Lesson is a Dead Language' have no ethnic elements. Throughout the play they speak in unison and their individualities are practically obliterated.

The entire action of the play takes place in a brightly lighted classroom. The colour contrast of Black and White forms the background in the stage setting. Pupils are Black wearing White dresses. The instructor is a large White dog and stands in front of the blackboard. The White dog symbolizes white imperialism and the ruler he slams on the table suggests his authority. He belongs to the world of elders. Gaby Rodgers after directing the play commented about the special role of the White dog in an interview.' the nun, the teacher of the children was portrayed as a big White dog. To show the children's terror of this big White dog/nun it spoke through an amplification system and was larger than life towering over these little girls in their white dresses drinking them in catechiesm.'[14]

Kennedy uses surrealistic techniques to bring out the trauma that lies in the unconscious of every woman and through her sensitive expressionistic portrayal is able to eternalize their pain. The language of the play is poetic but condensed. All the characters speak in a cold and formal voice. The title of the play probably has Biblical significance as The Lesson could be related to the original sin committed by Eve which led to her expulsion from the garden of Eden. The punishment of her sin of initiating Adam into eating the forbidden fruit has been passed on to her successors who face it in the form of the menstrual cycle. By the Dead language Kennedy could be referring to the lesson which is in the Latin language "a dead language" as also to Biblical preaching's of love, service and equality of all human beings which have now become obsolete and have lost their significance. The racial and gender exploitation of women in the United States makes the language of love and equality a dead language.

A lesson in Dead Language is remarkable both in its theme and treatment. The play begins by putting forth the instated fear and torment of a woman who reaches a state of sexual maturity. The blood- stigma overshadows all her sexual and maternal beginnings. Be it the menstrual cycle, sexual intercourse or child birth, a woman has to endure the pain and blood that comes out of her. Blood symbolizes loss of innocence and death. Kennedy has explored the unconscious trauma of the entire female world and brought out the fears, pain and torment with sensitivity. About the play's technique Kennedy says- I've discovered over the years that very often I'm trying to make up things when real things are far more powerful' they're begging to be used. The obvious is the answer very often'.[15] Gaby Rodgers elaborates on the technique and directional requirements of the play- 'you let the text direct you, it’s

very dense, its poetry. You need to give a theatre audience visual aids to help them understand... the language is often repetitive and circular. The repetition gives a text a traumatized and haunted air.... Yes, her work lacks relief... In a lesson, the young girls wear white dresses that have red blood stains on the back... the director needs to make this symbol clear with every possible means- actors, lights, sounds music... Without interpretation, her plays are not quite accessible to an audience.'[16]

The play truly is a statement in gender sensibility. Like all other plays of Kennedy, the trauma of womanhood is highlighted through a web of complicated metaphors. Although superficially the play seems to cross racial barriers yet the Blackness of the pupils does make a definite understatement in favour of Black females. Though the pain is universal yet for Mulatto it is more severe owing to the double jeopardy of racial and gender subjugation.

Kennedy effectively extends the trauma and pain of menstruation to the audience. The treatment of this biological barrier which women irrespective of their race have to face gives this play a distinguished universal flavour. On account of its theme and treatment the play emerges as a real work of art which undoubtedly shakes the audience out of their complacency and eternalizes the inherent fear of every girl who is on the threshold of womanhood.

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